

Ghodsee, K. *Red Hangover: Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.

I started reading this book with high hopes. Kristen Ghodsee is a veteran ethnographer of former socialist Eastern European countries, particularly Bulgaria and the former East Germany. She offers 14 essays, including four fictional works, portraying legacies of twentieth-century communism, mainly as experienced by ordinary people in the region. When the Soviet Bloc imploded in 1989, pundits predicted the end of history, with democracy and capitalism ascendant. More than a quarter century later, Ghodsee, while serving as a visiting scholar at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany, perceived the emergence of “political chaos” in the region, and these works are meant as a reflection on both the present and the past. In particular, she seeks to provide those born after 1989 with an appreciation of “historical nuance” regarding the legacy of communism and its supplanting by forms of neoliberalism. Ghodsee emphasizes that she is not an apologist for past socialist regimes. She also rejects the notion that communism was synonymous with only Stalinist crimes. The book highlights the hard times suffered by many eastern Europeans as their livelihoods, safety nets, and living standards declined due to poorly conceived and implemented market-based reforms. She acknowledges that her arguments about how the past and present are imagined and contested may be controversial but asserts that provoking “discussion and debate” is indeed critical. She admits, “If I haven’t angered someone out there, I’m not doing my job” (p. xviii). After finishing *Red Hangover*, my feeling was that any controversy generated by the work would be not so much about what Ghodsee argued as much as how she made her claims.

The book is organized into a four-part set of thematically-related yet essentially non-linear, idiosyncratic essays and fictional pieces. The first part deals with the gritty realities of post-socialist life in the Balkans. The section includes a chapter on politically-motivated suicides through self-immolation in Bulgaria, adventures and musings related to finding an official personnel file in a Bulgarian trash bin, a fictional story involving child trafficking for human organ harvesting, and another short story about a family’s anguish over whether to place a communist or ethnic symbol on a tombstone. Part two of the text examines political and economic tensions regarding German reunification, using in its respective chapters the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 2016 Liebknecht-Luxemburg Demonstration, and typewriters as starting points for deeper analysis. Ghodsee organizes the third part of the work around the contested historical memory of communism, including essays dealing with, respectively, sexuality and gender; the socialist past and public art displays; and legal suppression by the Ukrainian state, the European Union, and others. The final section of the book highlights “the unhappy marriage of democracy and capitalism and the wholesale rejection of anything having to do with socialism or communism after the end of the Cold War” (p. xix). Most of the material here (which includes jokes) is fictional and consists of Ghodsee’s own version of an Orwellian *Animal Farm* and the presentation of a dystopian future in which the author is victimized for her past politics. The book’s last essay returns to our troubled present, with a resurgent right and economic crisis looming. Ghodsee urges us “to get past our red hangover and recognize the pros and cons of both liberal democracy and state socialism in an effort to promote a system that gives us the best of both” (p. 200). She contends that communism failed because leaders betrayed its ideals. Democracy today is suffering from similar betrayals. The book ends with a plea for a serious re-thinking of the democratic project if humanity is to move forward.

Ghodsee is a lively if chatty writer, with a keen ability to integrate her own background and field experiences into the text. In fact, her presence looms so strongly in *Red Hangover*, including in both the essays and stories (notably the account in chapter 13 of a political interrogation of the author that takes place in 2029), that I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the work's self-referential nature. I generally applaud efforts to insert a personal voice into ethnographic analysis. Too often, as Keith Hart (2004) has pointed out, social researchers write themselves "out of the script" in reporting on their fieldwork, a task he noted that was all too easily accomplished upon returning home. For several decades now, ethnographers have been urged to write themselves *into* the action, which has often enriched our understanding of both the topic of study and how the research was actually accomplished. Yet, as with many things in life, balance is key. Too much insertion of the author into the text can detract from, rather than enhance, presentation and analysis. Initially, I thought that all of the information Ghodsee included about herself—attending Californian summer camp, possibly smelling a Bulgarian self-immolation protester, apparently being perceived in the field as a CIA agent, her Puerto Rican-Persian descent, typewriters making her a better writer, catching the eye of a young woman in the second row, and on and on—might be largely for the benefit of the young readership that she hoped to engage. After all, these are more like sound bytes from a lecture to undergraduates. If one was authentically interested in meeting the needs of that audience, however, including a map of Eastern Europe and a chronology of key events in the region might have helped students better contextualize the material. Indeed, I am puzzled, frankly, why Ghodsee felt that young readers should be provided with "only rudimentary background information" (p. xx). Be that as it may, at least *Red Hangover* contains an abundance of photographs. Their presence is especially helpful in chapter 4, a short story about how politics and historical memory shaped the choice of symbols on tombstones. Overall, as I read the book, I did not feel anger over its arguments, as the author might have expected but a sense of occasional annoyance at its constant self-referential character.

Ghodsee's regional expertise and her deep humanitarian concern for the fate of eastern Europe's large vulnerable populations are evident throughout *Red Hangover*. One gets a sense that she was profoundly troubled by current events around her, as well as by the many ways the state socialist past seems to be depicted, if not dismissed, and the book furnishes topical reports and fictional reflections as ways of challenging complacency and stimulating debate at this critical time. At the same time, the highly personal, almost quirky way that some of the material is introduced raises the question of whether *Red Hangover* offers sufficient empirical evidence to support its case. I felt that the essays did succeed in conveying a sense of the region's turmoil and the mixed feelings about the communist past. However, while I admire Ghodsee's creativity and ambition in including original works of fiction, I also question why she thought such pieces would provide a more compelling way of understanding eastern Europe's situation than using non-fictional material. After all, these are highly literate societies, and if one felt that fiction might be an effective means for delivering a particular message, then why not seek out stories prepared by the region's residents? I ended up unconvinced of the necessity for and effectiveness of the short stories, especially the one presented in chapter 13.

Ghodsee attains a greater degree of success in making the case for her broader argument regarding the urgent need to rethink the communist past and the neoliberal present as means of overcoming the political and socioeconomic chaos that threatens the region, if not the entire world. I believe that as the debate continues about the ideal political economy for meeting human needs, it will become apparent that communism's problems were more systematic and

widespread than can be attributed simply to bad leaders, as emphasized in the book. Everywhere it has been practiced, societies ended up with under-performing economies. It was often accompanied by social engineering and human rights abuses. But these issues are beside the point. While we should learn from state socialism's faults, acknowledging them does nothing to diminish the fact that people require dignity, jobs with honest pay, safe working conditions, affordable housing, quality education, and strict respect of their human rights. People are also better served by societies that do not allow power to become concentrated within a small class, whether it be the politburo or billionaires. In this sense, Ghodsee's *Red Hangover* is helpful in making the case that we need to address today's urgent problems and that looking at the past with an open mind will be a useful means for doing so.

Reference

Hart, K. (2004). African enterprise and the informal economy: An autobiographical note.
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